



U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

News Release

Pacific Islands External Affairs Office

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Public Comments Sought on Proposed Critical Habitat for Rota Bridled White-eye

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service released for public comment today a proposed rule designating critical habitat for the endangered Rota bridled white-eye – a small forest bird with a distinctive ring of white feathers around its eyes – in accordance with a lawsuit settlement. The Rota bridled white-eye exists only on the island of Rota in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands.

“Designation of critical habitat is one of the early stages of protecting rare species and provides interested parties the opportunity to provide valuable input,” said David B. Allen, Regional Director of the Fish and Wildlife Service’s Pacific Region. “Critical habitat does not guarantee the survival of a species, but rather the Service looks at this stage as an opportunity to inform the public and foster partnerships with the local government and people of Rota.”

The Service proposes that one unit of 3,958 acres be designated as critical habitat for the species on the island of Rota. The unit was occupied by the Rota bridled white-eye at the time of listing and contains native limestone forest and nonnative forest. The proposed designation consists of 94% government land under the jurisdiction of the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and 6% private land. Of this, approximately 1,225 acres overlap with existing critical habitat designated for the Mariana crow in 2004.

Rota bridled white-eye critical habitat was determined by using the best scientific and commercial data available. Information included peer-reviewed scientific publications, Service listing and recovery documents, unpublished reports from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands Division of Fish and Wildlife, aerial photographs and satellite imagery, and personal communications with local scientists and resource managers. Specific information used from these sources includes estimates of historical and current bird population distribution and abundance, as well as data on resource and habitat requirements.

This critical habitat designation is proposed in response to a lawsuit filed by the Center for Biological Diversity. On September 14, 2004, a settlement agreement was filed in the U.S. District Court (District of Hawaii) stating that a critical habitat proposal must be submitted by September 7, 2005, to the *Federal Register* for publication. In addition, the settlement states that final critical habitat be designated and published by September 7, 2006.

Critical habitat is a term in the Endangered Species Act that identifies specific geographic areas that are essential for the conservation of a threatened or endangered species and which may require special management considerations. However, a designation does not affect land ownership or establish a refuge, wilderness, reserve, preserve, or other special conservation area. It does not allow government or public access to private lands and does not close areas to all access or use. Federal

agencies that undertake, fund or permit activities that may affect critical habitat are required to consult with the Service to ensure such actions do not adversely modify or destroy designated critical habitat.

In 30 years of implementing the ESA, the Service has found that designation of critical habitat provides little additional protection for most listed species, while preventing the agency from using scarce conservation resources for activities with greater conservation benefits.

In almost all cases, recovery of listed species will come through voluntary cooperative partnerships, not regulatory measures such as critical habitat. Habitat is also protected through cooperative measures under the ESA, including Habitat Conservation Plans, Safe Harbor Agreements, Candidate Conservation Agreements, and state programs. In addition, voluntary partnership programs such as the Service's Private Stewardship Grants and the Partners for Fish and Wildlife program also restore habitat.

The Rota bridled white-eye is a small (approximately 4 inches in size) yellowish bird with a yellow-orange bill, legs, and feet. Average weight of the bird is about one-third of an ounce. The species feeds primarily on insects and often is found in small flocks of five to seven birds. Related species include the Guam bridled white-eye, which is believed to be extinct, and the Saipan bridled white-eye, which is relatively abundant on Saipan, Tinian, and Aguigan.

Since 1982, the Rota bridled white-eye population has declined by 90 percent, with current estimates numbering 1,092 birds. Possible factors contributing to the decline include degradation or loss of habitat due to development, agricultural activities, predation by introduced rats and black drongos (a bird species from Taiwan), and naturally occurring events such as typhoons.

The Service appreciates all comments on the proposed rule but is particularly seeking information concerning:

- why habitat should or should not be designated and whether or not the benefit of designation outweighs the benefits of not designating critical habitat for the species;
- specific information on the amount and distribution of Rota bridled white-eye habitat, and what habitat is essential to the survival of the species and why;
- land use designations and current or planned activities in the subject areas and their possible impacts on proposed critical habitat;
- any foreseeable economic, or other potential impacts resulting from the proposed designation and any impacts on small entities; and
- whether our approach to designating critical habitat could be improved or modified in any way to provide for greater public participation and understanding, or to assist us in accommodating public concerns and comments.

The Service will consider comments from all interested parties received by November 14, 2005. Requests for public hearing must be received, in writing by October 31, 2005. Comments and materials concerning the proposal may be sent via the Internet to **RBWE_CritHab@fws.gov**. Please include "Attn: Rota bridled white-eye" in your subject header and your name and return address in the body of the message. Comments and information may also be mailed or faxed to Patrick Leonard, Field Supervisor, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, 300 Ala Moana Boulevard, Room 3-122, Box 50088, Honolulu, Hawaii 96850 (Fax 808 792 9581).

The proposed rule was published in the *Federal Register* on September 14, 2005.. Copies of the proposed rule may be downloaded from the Service's website at <http://pacificislands.fws.gov> or by calling the Fish and Wildlife Service's Honolulu office 808-792-9400.

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service is the principal Federal agency responsible for conserving, protecting and enhancing fish, wildlife and plants and their habitats for the continuing benefit of the American people. The Service manages the 95-million-acre National Wildlife Refuge System, which encompasses 545 national wildlife refuges, thousands of small wetlands and other special management areas. It also operates 69 national fish hatcheries, 64 fishery resources offices and 81 ecological services field stations. The agency enforces federal wildlife laws, administers the Endangered Species Act, manages migratory bird populations, restores nationally significant fisheries, conserves and restores wildlife habitat such as wetlands, and helps foreign and Native American tribal governments with their conservation efforts. It also oversees the Federal Assistance program, which distributes hundreds of millions of dollars in excise taxes on fishing and hunting equipment to state fish and wildlife agencies.